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The Birch Society Goes to Congress

Until recent days, Washington's general attitude toward the John Birch Society has been: Don't look and maybe it will go away.

But, now it's in a fair way to becoming a major national issue, along with such controversial episodes as the A. P. A., the Ku Klux Klan and the America Firsters.

Charges have been made that the society, which claims its purposes are similar to those of the House Un-American Activities Committee, is itself un-American in its activities, a sort of Big Brother.

Two society members in Congress, Reps. Edgar Hiestand and John Rousseau, both California Republicans, are urging the House Rules Committee to approve a special investigation of the society to "clear the air" of these charges.

They have suggested as chairman of the probing committee the only other member of their own Rules Committee who has shown any interest, Rep. Ray J. Madden. He's the choice because he blasted them with a barrage of questions about the society founder, Robert Welch, who has been quoted as charging everything from Communist fellow-traveling to treason against former President Eisenhower, the late Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Central Intelligence Agency Chief Allen W. Dulles, Chief Justice Warren, the Protestant clergy and others.

There is something slightly reminiscent about all this. From small beginnings, like this Birch Society affair, there has been a tendency for certain organizations regarded as unimportant gadflies to draw upon the wells of prejudice and inhibited intolerance for sustenance until they became greater monsters than the fallacious prejudice upon which they fed.

If a hearing, such as is suggested by Hiestand and Rousseau, can clear the air in this instance before a gadfly becomes one of the Furies, as enemies of the John Birch Society charge it is, by all means let us have it.

Perhaps we may escape another travail such as has torn our American society before. This is no time for a repetition of previous witch hunts. There are too many real, concrete manifestations of Communism abroad for us to indulge in reasonless self-flagellation now.